

**ILLUSION AND REALITY IN THE FICTION OF IRIS MURDOCH:
A STUDY OF *THE BLACK PRINCE*, *THE SEA*, *THE SEA*
AND *THE GOOD APPRENTICE***

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers how Iris Murdoch radically reconceptualises the possibilities of realism through her interrogation of the relationship between life and art. Her awareness of the unreality of realist conventions leads her to seek new forms of expression, resulting in daring experimentation with form and language, exploration of the relationship between author and character, and foregrounding of the artificiality of the text. She exposes the limitations of language, thereby involving herself with issues associated with the postmodern aesthetic. *The Black Prince* is an artistic manifesto in which Murdoch repeatedly destroys the illusion of the reality of the text in her attempts to make language communicate truth. Whereas *The Black Prince* sees Murdoch contemplating *Hamlet*, *The Sea*, *The Sea* meditates on *The Tempest*, as Murdoch returns to Shakespeare in order to examine the relationship between life and art. In *The Good Apprentice*, Murdoch continues to interrogate the artist's paradoxical relationship with power. These novels illustrate the creative tension in Murdoch's work stemming from the conflict between the realist tradition and her philosophy which has led her beyond it. Murdoch makes her fiction the site of a ceaseless struggle against the self, as she ruthlessly scrutinises her own shortcomings and strips away the illusion-generating ego in a continuous process which never permits the elusive concept of reality to stabilise.

For my parents, Peter and Marion, and my brother, William.

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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

Murdoch's metaphysical questions 'are the very ones upon which the interest of all fiction depends. Our lives are momentous: all of her tremendous novelistic energy is bent to sustaining that faith. Our lives have meaning, there is such a thing as goodness; the head supplies so little evidence . . . but the heart keeps insisting.'¹

Iris Murdoch makes her fiction the site of a ceaseless struggle against the self, as she ruthlessly scrutinises what she perceives as her own shortcomings and strips away the illusion-generating ego in a continuous process which never permits the elusive concept of reality to stabilise. Her awareness of the unreality of realist conventions has led her to seek new ways to articulate what is real, resulting in daring experimentation with form and language, exploration of the relationship between author and character, and foregrounding of the artificiality of the text. She exposes the limitations of language itself, which filters reality, preventing the artist from presenting things and people as they really are. Through her interrogation of the relationship between life and art, Murdoch radically reconceptualises the possibilities of realism. Although Murdoch may not have consciously sought affiliation with the postmodern aesthetic, in retrospect she certainly seems to involve herself with issues which are dominant in, although not exclusive to, an early phase in the development of postmodernist fiction.

Murdoch divides her audience. Objections to her work are well-documented: it is considered to be full of forced coincidences and repetitive character types, excessively plot-driven and overly patterned, too narrow in its social range and archaic in technique, seemingly at odds with the experimentation of Murdoch's contemporaries. At the start of her career, despite some favourable comments, critics' responses to her work wildly conflicted, implying that they often did not understand the work being reviewed.² Peter Conradi notes that some critics over-reacted to the apparent contradiction between

¹ John Updike, 'Expeditions to Gilead and Seegard,' *New Yorker* 62, 1986: 126.

² Hilda D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) 132.

Murdoch's early essays, which are very much of their time in their argument that the novelist must recreate realism and avoid excessive emphasis on form in order to make characters free, and her own novels which are preoccupied with pattern, fantasy and myth. To Conradi, critics have been 'too absolutist and pious about the early theory'.³ It is hardly surprising that an artist develops and changes as she tries to work out her position during a career spanning several decades. Critics have over-simplified Murdoch's views by claiming that she values 'character' and rejected 'form', when in fact she proposes a middle way which involves reconciliation of the two. Misinterpretation of the complexities of Murdoch's theory has therefore led to a lack of understanding of the fiction.

A. S. Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom* (1965) did much to counter adverse criticism, and from the mid-1960s onwards Murdoch came to be seen as one of the leading novelists of her time, although her detractors continued to slight her work, often making little attempt to comprehend it.⁴ The events of Murdoch's life have also perhaps clouded her readers' responses to her fiction. John Bayley's trilogy⁵ focuses our attention on Murdoch as a victim of Alzheimer's Disease. It is emotional, sincere and poignant but at times confusingly veers into Bayley's own fantasies. Richard Eyre's film *Iris* (2001) creates for popular consumption two simplified, exaggerated and polarised images of Murdoch: the young, passionate student and the tortured Alzheimer's sufferer. We now need to turn back to the novels, with a greater focus on those produced during Murdoch's mature phase, in order to dispassionately reassess her work.

Like her character Arnold Baffin in *The Black Prince* (1973), Murdoch is well-aware of her shortcomings. Arnold eloquently defends himself:

³ Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001) 26.

⁴ Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, 135.

⁵ John Bayley, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Duckworth, 1998); *Iris and the Friends* (London: Duckworth, 1999); *Widower's House* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

‘I live, I *live*, with an absolutely continuous sense of failure. I am always defeated, always. Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one has only one life. If one has a thing at all one must do it and keep on and on and on trying to do it better.’⁶

Murdoch’s texts reveal that she is engaged in a continual struggle against herself as she strives to overcome her own weaknesses and above all to articulate what she believes to be real and true. This struggle characterises her work and makes her one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.

Throughout her career Murdoch was interrogating issues which had concerned her predecessors and continued to preoccupy many of her contemporaries. Henry James had written in 1900: ‘It has arrived, in truth, the novel, late at self-consciousness, but has done its utmost ever since to make up for lost opportunities.’⁷ This self-consciousness characterises the experimentation of early twentieth century modernist writers – James, Woolf, Joyce, Proust – who were concerned with ‘exploring the mythic and symbolic sources of fiction, its creative nature, and the gap between the word and the thing.’⁸ The movement of Modernism seemed to end with World War Two, and in the face of social change it became increasingly perceived as the mode of a privileged metropolitan minority. In the 1950s, the novel seemed to be returning to a more traditional realist view, in emulation of eighteenth and nineteenth-century fictional models. However, writers such as Doris Lessing, John Fowles and Muriel Spark - like the modernists who had preceded them - felt that the inherited traditions of realism were naïve, inauthentic and inadequate to represent modern reality, and the following years saw a further shift away from traditional realism. Murdoch’s early essays express dissatisfaction with modernism, and her first published novel, *Under the Net* (1954) was aligned with writers of the ‘Movement’ by some critics who misinterpreted it as ‘Angry’ social realism. This was

⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) 139.

⁷ Henry James, ‘The Future of the Novel,’ *Theory of Fiction*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1971), 338.

⁸ Malcolm Bradbury, Introduction, *The Novel Today, Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990) 4.

soon realised to be incorrect.⁹ The concerns articulated in Murdoch's novels about art and artifice refute this simple categorisation. *Under the Net* expresses such concerns, long before they became fashionable. Despite the assumptions of some of the novel's early critics,¹⁰ she does not finally allow her hero, Jake, to arrive at an unmediated vision of reality any more than her readers do in life, and this is also true of the characters within her other novels; the pilgrimage from appearance to reality is shown to be a task without end. Michel Butor shows the continuing fundamental importance of her concerns when, fourteen years after the original publication of *Under the Net*, he draws attention to the network of narratives in which all human beings are enmeshed. Butor contends that traditional realist narrative techniques are inadequate to articulate the reality of a rapidly changing world, and he claims that writers should expose the falsity of realism by experimenting with new forms which will result in a greater truth to reality. He condemns

‘novelists who refuse to question themselves about the nature of their work and the validity of the forms they employ; those forms which could not be reflected upon without immediately revealing their inadequacy, their untruthfulness, those forms which give us an image of reality in flagrant contradiction to the reality which gave them birth’.¹¹

In *Under the Net*, Murdoch's character Hugo goes further, not simply challenging the ability of realist conventions to present reality, but questioning whether language itself is able to do so: ‘[t]he whole language is a machine for making falsehoods.’¹² Murdoch has been at the forefront of this debate since the start of her career, probing to its limits the potential of language to articulate her personal vision of reality.

In her 1961 essay ‘Against Dryness’ Murdoch comments that the twentieth century

⁹ Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, 131.

¹⁰ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* (London: Vintage, 1994) 38. Byatt claims that Jake becomes ‘free of his own net of fantasy’.

¹¹ Michel Butor, ‘The Novel as Research,’ *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990) 50.

¹² Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954) 68.

novel is usually either journalistic or crystalline. The journalistic novel ('a large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendant of the nineteenth century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts') and the crystalline novel ('a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing 'characters' in the nineteenth-century sense')¹³ can be seen as broadly correlating with nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century modernism respectively.¹⁴ In Murdoch's view both are insufficient for the accurate presentation of modern reality, which can no longer be seen as a given whole capable of transcription in words, and which contains real, endlessly complex people. In her dissatisfaction with the traditions she inherits, and in her desire for the novelist to find a middle way in order truthfully to articulate reality, she seems to anticipate the theme central to David Lodge's 1969 essay 'The Novelist at the Crossroads'. Lodge envisages the novelist pausing on a road which represents the central realist tradition, and considering whether to turn in the direction of the non-fiction novel or of fabulation. Lodge has reservations about both of these directions, and suggests that there is another option:

'[t]he novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to *build their hesitation into the novel itself*.'¹⁵

This results in the 'problematic novel', which has some connections with both the non-fiction novel and fabulation, but also takes for its subject the difficulties inherent in the writing of fiction. It is therefore likely to expose and undermine realist conventions, and to draw the reader into this process. To Lodge, this is a sign of progress for realist fiction, because the continued struggle to reconcile realist conventions with reality

¹³ Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness,' *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990) 20.

¹⁴ Bradbury, Introduction, *The Novel Today*, 10.

¹⁵ David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads,' *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990) 109. (Lodge's emphases).

requires skill and discipline and results in the creation of superior fiction. Murdoch's mature work seems to embody some of the characteristics of Lodge's problematic novel. As I will show, she stays within the realist tradition, but constantly challenges its conventions, questioning how the artist can articulate reality using the limited medium of language; how to impose form without allowing it to dominate; how to make characters free and independent of the authorial will. She uses her fiction as a testing ground, pitting arguments against each other, in a continual debate with herself. The extent to which some of her works reveal awareness of the unreality of realism, foreground the fictionality of the text, and involve the reader in the process of interpretation means that she can retrospectively be viewed as postmodern and very much of her time. This might imply that she is opposed to realism, when in fact a careful consideration of her work suggests that she is revitalising the tradition and radically extending its possibilities.

For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to focus on Murdoch's fiction rather than her philosophy. The fiction is clearly informed by the philosophy because it is in the fictional mode that she tests out and develops her ideas. However, Murdoch insisted that 'art goes deeper than philosophy' because it has the facility to articulate the density of persons and the individuality of situations.¹⁶ In the early novels, up to *The Nice and the Good* (1968) and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), Murdoch seems to be searching for appropriate forms to accommodate her abundance of ideas. As David J. Gordon observes, this leads to a tendency to depend on established novelistic conventions and schematic plots. This period of Murdoch's career can be viewed as preparing the way for the major phase.¹⁷ From the late 1960s her novels become more original, complex and open. She begins to take more risks and to investigate more fully the problems of narration and narrative devices. The novels of the late phase - after 1985 - are problematic, yet continue to break new ground, 'trying to find what the age requires by bringing together in one

¹⁶ Bryan Magee, 'Philosophy and Literature: Dialogue with Iris Murdoch,' *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Viking Press, 1979) 277.

¹⁷ David J. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 15.

incarnation both magic and religion.’¹⁸ Conradi has commented that critical attention has tended to focus on her earlier work: ‘the early theory, and also the real but limited success of the early apprentice fiction, have obscured the enormous, disorderly merits of the later work, which in its turn must alter the way we view the earlier.’¹⁹ It would therefore seem appropriate to give attention in this thesis to novels written during the later stages of Murdoch’s career. The three novels which I have selected were produced during Murdoch’s major phase and demonstrate a range of different angles from which Murdoch tackles her concerns about reality. *The Black Prince* is an artistic manifesto in which Murdoch repeatedly destroys the illusion of the reality of the text in her attempts to make language communicate truth. Her exploration of the relationship between author and character is pushed to extremes in this text. These are issues which continue to obsess Murdoch in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). *The Black Prince* sees Murdoch contemplating *Hamlet*; *The Sea, The Sea* meditates on *The Tempest*, as Murdoch returns to Shakespeare in order to scrutinise the relationship between life and art. The third novel, *The Good Apprentice* (1985), has a less overt metafictional focus. However, it can be seen as the culmination of her major phase. In this novel Murdoch continues to interrogate the artist’s paradoxical relationship with power, rejuvenating the realist tradition through her ongoing struggle against the self.

The basis of my thesis in previous and current debate surrounding Murdoch necessitates a survey of the contributions of these critics who have commented on Murdoch’s interrogation of the relationship between illusion and reality. The majority of criticism on Murdoch’s writing was produced during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. My research has therefore been largely guided by key critical works which may seem rather dated but which are nevertheless relevant and original. However, in the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in Murdoch’s work, partly due to the ‘ethical turn’, which has caused a return to the centrality of the relationship between ethics and literature and a

¹⁸ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch’s Fables of Unselfing*, 15.

¹⁹ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 3.

reaction against theorisation of literary texts. Also, increased interest may have been generated because now that we have some perspective on postmodernism, Murdoch's work can more clearly than ever be seen to involve itself with issues that are dominant in, although not exclusive to, this aesthetic. I have therefore also sourced a number of more recent texts which have offered fresh perspectives on Murdoch's work. A number of other authors have also been consulted, who have not been included in this brief survey but are acknowledged where appropriate in the main body of the text.

At a time when many critics expressed 'relative incomprehension'²⁰ at Murdoch's merging of fantasy and realism, Byatt's influential study *Degrees of Freedom* and her subsequent criticism of Murdoch's work discussed the complex relationship between Murdoch's fiction and philosophy and greatly enhanced her reputation. Byatt shows understanding of Murdoch's dissatisfaction with the artificial conventions of realism. For example, Byatt suggests that in *The Black Prince* the characters of Arnold and Bradley are being used by Murdoch as part of her attempt to find a middle way between the 'conventional' social realism of journalistic novelists and the 'neurotic' psychological realism of crystalline novelists.²¹ This insight has guided my analysis in Chapter Two. Turning to *The Sea, The Sea*, Byatt claims that this novel's most admirable aspect is Murdoch's achievement of her ambition to create a whole world full of people, a hybrid of magical fable and nineteenth-century realism. This accomplishment means that despite the magic, which causes 'breaks in the smooth flow of belief', *The Sea, The Sea* has a sense of deep truth to reality.²² Byatt situates Murdoch in relation to those of her contemporaries who were also reconceptualising realism.²³ Murdoch's search for a way to accurately represent reality in fact draws her to experiment with a whole spectrum of

²⁰ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 31.

²¹ A. S. Byatt, 'People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Postwar Fiction,' *The Contemporary English Novel*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979) 41.

²² Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 281-286.

²³ Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 323.

techniques which can be considered within the context of postmodernism, and I examine these in more detail within the main body of my text.

Elizabeth Dipple extends Byatt's focus on form, structure and narrative voice. With regard to *The Sea, The Sea*, Dipple observes the egoism inherent in Charles's pretentious deliberations over the form of his writing, and his attempts to impose form over the events of his life because he is unable to come to terms with the whole of reality.²⁴ Maria Antonaccio extends the critical focus on Charles's inability to confront reality through detailed consideration of Murdoch's development of a new conception of the individual as a separate being, related to but not dominated by a complex social reality.²⁵ Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime is of prime importance here because it provides an opening for recognition of what is real. I explore Murdoch's presentation of the individual's relationship to the sublime more fully in Chapter Three.

Deborah Johnson's main focus is on Murdoch's use of male narrators and is thus particularly relevant to my analysis of *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, The Sea*. Seduced by the glamour of words, the narratives of Murdoch's male narrators are self-deceiving, unreliable, and incomplete. Johnson, influenced by Luce Irigaray, sees Murdoch's use of the male narrator as a liberating device. It acts as mask, protection and disguise, and also allows the author to offer an implicit commentary on her narrator through the use of interruptions, omissions and silences. Johnson claims that at the close of *The Sea, The Sea*, the voices of the author and narrator merge, conflating the dramatised and omniscient modes of narration.²⁶ In Chapter Three I give Johnson's views further consideration in conjunction with a study of *The Tempest*, another text which presents an enchanter figure who is frequently equated with his creator, a text which is deeply concerned with its own artificial nature. Dipple is also helpful here, because she explores

²⁴ Elizabeth Dipple, *Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen, 1982) 275-6.

²⁵ Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 104.

²⁶ Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) 104-5.

Charles's self-identification with Prospero, and reveals his 'hopeless naivety' and 'limited apprehension' of his model.²⁷

Conradi usefully compares the use of first-person male narrative voice in *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, The Sea*.²⁸ Whereas in *The Black Prince* Murdoch relies on the convention of the wiser Bradley who comments on the narrative of the earlier, blinded Bradley, in *The Sea, The Sea* the more sophisticated narrative method denies both narrator and reader the privileges of hindsight. Bran Nicol extends critical thinking in this area through his focus on Murdoch's use of the first-person retrospective narrative in *The Sea, The Sea* which he argues is unsettling because it seems to offer the potential to connect past and present and thus to allow Charles to realise his fantasy.²⁹ Murdoch seems drawn to the idea that time can be recaptured through art, yet she is aware of its shortcomings, and ultimately denies her protagonist this consoling fantasy. These critics have informed my analysis of Murdoch's narrative method in Chapter Three.

Conradi's analysis of repetition in Murdoch's fiction is illuminating. Dipple had already noted the connections in *The Sea, The Sea* between the two magicians, Charles and James. Conradi also points out the parallel between Charles and Ben, and thereby emphasises a key lesson of the novel: it is almost impossible to give up power or to significantly change. With reference to *The Good Apprentice*, Conradi's discussion of Murdoch's belief that human beings substitute one illusion for another in a ceaseless cycle of repetition³⁰ assists the reader's understanding of the falsity of the concept of the quest. In Chapter Four I further explore Murdoch's use of repetition and substitution, which helps to explain her ambivalence towards Freud.

²⁷ Dipple, *Work for the Spirit*, 285-9.

²⁸ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 294.

²⁹ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004) 136-149.

³⁰ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 203.

In *The Good Apprentice* Murdoch departs from her earlier practice by using a third-person narrative voice to editorialise directly about her characters. This departure has received mixed critical responses. Harold Bloom is particularly critical of the narrative voice.³¹ He envisages Murdoch as attempting to emulate the nineteenth-century fictional model and therefore judges her narrative voice in relation to George Eliot's, finding it to be inferior. In Chapter Four I take issue with such judgements, and, like Conradi, I contend that although Murdoch has been criticised for her supposed failure to recreate the nineteenth-century novel, this has never been her aim. Instead, her writing is 'a living process [. . .] inspired by the art of the past.'³²

Gordon's focus on Murdoch's struggle with the paradox of keeping her characters free whilst imposing her artistic will upon them has informed my analysis of *The Good Apprentice* in Chapter Four. Gordon sees this struggle as 'the clue to what is strongest in Murdoch'.³³ He considers *The Good Apprentice* to be 'the most successful of her later attempts to confront the tension between art and magic, between the artist's need for and distrust of power' and believes that in this novel Murdoch comes to understand magic as something which the artist cannot repudiate. I perceive this insight to be a crucial part of Murdoch's ongoing development, as she continues throughout her career to participate in a debate riven with irresolvable contradictions.

To briefly summarise the content of my thesis: in Chapter Two, I consider Murdoch's highly personal vision of reality and focus on her daring experimentation with language and structure in order to articulate this vision. I then progress to analysing how Murdoch uses the characters of Bradley Pearson and Arnold Baffin in order to stage a confrontation between journalistic and crystalline writing, dramatising the inner conflict

³¹ Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Iris Murdoch*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 1-7.

³² Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 364.

³³ David J. Gordon, 'Iris Murdoch's Comedies of Unselfing,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 36. 2, 1990: 131.

with which she struggles in her attempt to find a middle way between these traditions. Finally, I turn to an analysis of Bradley's interpretation of *Hamlet*, which is used by Murdoch to scrutinise the relationship between author and character.

In Chapter Three, I consider *The Sea*, *The Sea*'s narrative method, which seems to offer the protagonist the tantalising prospect of reclaiming the past, although this consolation is ultimately denied him. I explore Murdoch's focus on the presentation of the individual in relation to reality, and the novel's intertextual connections to *The Tempest*. In both *The Black Prince* and *The Sea*, *The Sea* Murdoch's testing of the relationship between life and art has led her into dialogue with Shakespeare, whose work is also positioned on the dividing line between illusion and reality.

In my fourth chapter I use *The Good Apprentice* as a basis for investigation of Murdoch's use of the quest topos and her revelation of its ultimate inadequacy as a metaphor for living. Exploration of Murdoch's use of the quest reveals her deep ambivalence towards the Freudian theory of substitution, and her belief that freedom from repetition can be sought through attention to signs which offer a momentary indication of reality. I then discuss the novel's narrative method, which has been interpreted by some critics as a recreation of the nineteenth-century model but which can also be viewed as a revitalisation of the realist tradition. Analysis of this novel reveals how Murdoch continues ceaselessly to question the artist's relationship with power. She shows her readers that although art will inevitably fail to reach perfection, this is no reason for the artist to abandon the struggle for its achievement.

Chapter Two: LOVE AND ART IN *THE BLACK PRINCE*

‘The human soul craves for the eternal of which, apart from certain rare mysteries of religion, only love and art can give a glimpse.’¹

The Black Prince is the novel in which Murdoch offers her most comprehensive exploration of Eros and art as paths to the good. The novel has challenged critics due to its use of experimental features such as frame-breaking and its apparent refusal to achieve closure. In her search for truth to reality, Murdoch repeatedly destroys the illusion of the reality of the text. The protagonist, Bradley Pearson, is engaged on a search for truth and clear vision. Bradley Pearson is a fifty-eight year old perfectionist, bound by theories of art, who longs to create a masterpiece but has so far failed to do so. He self-consciously sees himself as waiting for an ordeal which will release his creativity. He is threatened by the worldly success of his former protégé, Arnold Baffin. Bradley finally achieves a previously inconceivable intensity of vision when he is overwhelmed by love for Arnold’s twenty year old daughter Julian. This experience of love opens a gateway into a new world. Although the nature of Bradley’s love is highly ambiguous, its power fires him with inspiration which enables him to pursue his art. Whilst in prison, and soon to face death, Bradley is able to transform love into art and at last write his masterpiece, a work of art which attempts to tell the truth without consolation. This brief plot summary is inadequate because the novel is far more than its plot; form, structure and narrative voice are integral to its meaning. In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch has reached the achievement which Bradley attributes to Shakespeare. She has succeeded in producing ‘a work endlessly reflecting upon itself, [. . .] a meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of those without identity, that is human beings.’ (199)

Murdoch herself has observed that *The Black Prince* ‘has got its own inbuilt mode of explanation. It is made pretty clear in the book how you should interpret the wanderings

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) 210.

and maanderings of a narrator and where you should believe him and where you should not believe him'.² Despite this assertion, the novel has been subject to a diverse range of readings and continues to generate debate, from Richard Todd³ and Peter Conradi's⁴ explorations of its connections to *Hamlet*, to Deborah Johnson's examination of Murdoch's complex relationship with her male narrator⁵ and Martha Nussbaum's investigation into Murdoch's presentation of erotic love.⁶ This multiplicity of interpretations shows that *The Black Prince* is too complex and ambivalent to accommodate any single critical approach. Any reading must necessarily be provisional. Within the limited scope of this chapter, I want to begin by exploring what constitutes reality for Murdoch, and how she attempts to push the boundaries of language and structure in order to articulate her highly personal vision of reality. I will then progress to analysing how Murdoch uses the characters of Bradley Pearson and Arnold Baffin in order to stage a debate between journalistic and crystalline writing, both of which she feels are inadequate to express reality. Murdoch's search for a third way led her to experiment with language and form in order to more accurately represent reality, and this experimentation reaches its peak in *The Black Prince*. Finally, I wish to analyse Bradley's interpretation of *Hamlet*, which is used by Murdoch to probe to its limits the relationship between author and character.

For Murdoch, realism is the 'ability to perceive reality.'⁷ Murdoch's interpretation

² Christopher Bigsby, 'Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 103.

³ Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch: the Shakespearian Interest* (London: Vision Press, 1979).

⁴ Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

⁵ Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987).

⁶ Martha Craven Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge": Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*,' *Poetics Today* 25.4, 2004: 689-710.

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 66.

of reality seems to be intensely personal, being intricately bound up with her Platonism. Plato's reality is the world of the Forms, which exists beyond or before empirical reality. The Forms, the greatest of which is goodness, can only be perceived by paying close attention to the world as it really is, free from illusion. This clarity of vision is achieved by the ruthless stripping away of the fantasy-generating ego, in a continuous process which never allows the concept of reality to stabilise. Plato sees art as false because it imitates an imitation and is therefore distanced from reality. However, Murdoch's view of art is more sympathetic. Through the character of Bradley Pearson she shows us that although the pursuit of good art can lead the artist into delusion and the abuse of power, this pursuit can also lead to truth.

A central preoccupation in Murdoch's work is the problem of how to articulate reality using the restricted medium of language. The character of Bradley epitomises this struggle towards reality. Murdoch uses him to test her views, seeking her own unselfing as well as that of her character. Although the naive realist may assume that there is one knowable shared reality and may believe that the world can be precisely represented in words, in fact 'the nature of language is such that there can be no such thing as a neutral transcription of an object into words.'⁸ Because art possesses form, it cannot be entirely true to the chaos and contingency of reality. The challenge for the artist is to impose form without it becoming a kind of consolation for the failure to apprehend reality. As Henry James observes: '[r]eally, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.'⁹ Murdoch's use of patterning, myth and symbol seems at variance with her belief that art should reflect life's contingency. However, Conradi observes that her apparent contrivance in fact offers its own truth, which he classifies as 'visionary' or 'magical' realism.¹⁰ Ironically, one example of Murdoch's

⁸ Winifred Nowotny, *The Language Poets Use* (London; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1962) 45.

⁹ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (London: Scribner, 1935) 5.

¹⁰ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 7.

success in this area can be seen when Richard Todd tries to find a clear-cut pattern by mapping Hamlet onto Bradley and onto Julian: 'we are never entirely sure to what extent to associate the character of Hamlet with Pearson himself, or with Julian Baffin.' Todd is eventually forced to accept that Hamlet is a composite figure in the novel: 'lack of economy at the level of pattern [. . .] is nothing less than functional to the creation of the character of Pearson.'¹¹ As Conradi observes, 'the identifications between the plot of *Hamlet* and *The Black Prince* are multifarious.'¹² He observes that Arnold is yet another character who resembles Hamlet, when he begs Julian and Bradley not to sleep together: 'the culmination of a series of clues as to the intensity of his and Julian's mutual feelings'. Conradi concludes that 'both texts invite and require a Freudian reading, and neither can be satisfied or exhausted by it.'¹³ Deborah Johnson explores this avenue further, commenting on the female Oedipus conflict which complicates and subverts Bradley's interpretation of his relationship with Julian.¹⁴ Hamlet haunts *The Black Prince* but does not dominate it. The relationship between the texts has deliberately been made ambiguous, reflecting the mystery and randomness of reality.

Murdoch considers reality to be incomprehensible: '[w]hat does exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed, it escapes from language and science, it is more and other than our descriptions of it.'¹⁵ The artist's vision of reality must unavoidably be filtered through theory and language, and *The Black Prince* can be interpreted as a meditation on this problem. To Murdoch, Shakespeare is the supreme realist because he has somehow been able to get under the net of language and to reconcile character and pattern. Although Bradley is not merely Murdoch's mouthpiece (she said in an interview 'some of Bradley's observations,

¹¹ Todd, *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest*, 30, 33.

¹² Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 250.

¹³ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 248.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, 16.

¹⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1953) 14.

I think, are quite acute; others are dotty')¹⁶ his view of Shakespeare does seem to express some of Murdoch's own observations. To Bradley, '*Hamlet* is words, and so is Hamlet' (199). He thinks that Shakespeare has purified the language of *Hamlet* to such an extent that words no longer signify but 'are' the character which they describe. This facility has arisen from Shakespeare's genuinely clear vision of reality. In 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' Murdoch seems to endorse Bradley's view when she discerns in Shakespeare's 'loving toleration of, indeed delight in, manifold different modes of being, a beginning of the modern world.'¹⁷ In the same essay, Murdoch suggests that there has been a change of consciousness since Shakespeare's time which makes his achievement practically impossible to imitate by modern artists. She expresses her dissatisfaction with the liberal and existentialist philosophies which both tend towards solipsism and have left us with a shallow and inadequate idea of human personality. The existentialist tradition has resulted in the modern crystalline novel, 'a tight metaphysical object, which wishes it were a poem, and which attempts to convey, often in mythical form, some central truth about the human condition', whereas the liberal tradition has led to the journalistic novel, which is 'enormous, formless, topical.'¹⁸

A.S. Byatt suggests that in *The Black Prince* Murdoch is using the characters of Arnold Baffin and Bradley Pearson to stage a debate between journalistic and crystalline writing.¹⁹ Bradley defines the novel as 'the story of my relations with Arnold and the astounding climax to which these relations led' (29), encouraging the reader to see his relationship with Arnold as being even more significant than his relationship with Julian.

¹⁶ Jack I. Biles, 'An Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 68.

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' *Yale Review* 49, 1959: 263.

¹⁸ Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 264-265.

¹⁹ A. S. Byatt, 'People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Postwar Fiction,' *The Contemporary English Novel*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979) 41.

For much of his life Bradley is obsessed with language and form. He is full of theories about art, which have inhibited his creativity; he has produced only two ‘crystalline’ novels. He self-consciously waits for inspiration: ‘[t]here are, I hazard, saints of art who have simply waited mutely all their lives rather than profane the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful, that is to say, with what is true’ (12). He constantly asks other people to express themselves with accuracy (‘Rachel, now do try to be more *precise*. [. . .] Truth does matter’ (177)), implying that he is searching for clarity and truth but does not yet understand what it really means. He has romanticised the idea of the divine inspiration of the artist, and is mistaken in his belief that he should isolate himself and look within for this inspiration. This indicates that he is full of the illusion that the present and the self are the centre. He seems to represent Murdoch’s ‘Totalitarian Man’ trying to work out his own salvation by an exercise in self-discovery. In contrast, Arnold Baffin represents the journalistic side of the debate. He gathers his ideas from the world around him, but fails to pay close enough attention to what he experiences. Instead he appears to impose himself on the world, viewing all his characters as extensions of himself. Arnold is aware of his limitations, and eloquently defends himself: ‘Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one has only one life. If one has a thing at all one must do it and keep on and on and on trying to do it better’ (172). In this respect he echoes Murdoch who reflected that ‘one is always discontented with what one has done.’²⁰ In contrast, Bradley seems more confident in thinking of himself as a ‘true’ artist, and this is perhaps a kind of consolation for his failure to be as productive as his rival: ‘You’re all ‘writer’. I don’t see myself in that way. I think of myself as an artist, that is a dedicated person’ (50). Bradley is eventually shocked out of this self-image and breaks out of the tight crystalline form. The secondary, transformed Bradley realises the desirability of tampering with form, because he understands that the artist is creating reality and thereby enlarging the scope of art. Gabriel Pearson has observed that the relationship between Bradley and Arnold can also

²⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, ‘Two Interviews with Iris Murdoch,’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 228.

be viewed as a conflict between the two sides of Murdoch's personality as she engages in a personal struggle to find a way of most accurately representing reality: 'the equivalent of an overdue debate between that aspect of Iris Murdoch's activity that has poured out fifteen novels with fatal fluency and the chaste and strict mind that wrote the book on Sartre and *The Sovereignty of Good*.'²¹ Murdoch uses this debate in order to make progress in her search for a middle way which can combine the naturalism of the journalistic novel with the symbolism of the crystalline.

We need, Murdoch says, to pay more attention to the naturalism of nineteenth century novelists (above all, Tolstoy and George Eliot), whose novels 'contain a number of different people' and 'are victims neither of convention nor of neurosis.'²² However, our modern attitude to language has created new problems because we have become self-conscious about the relationship between words and things. We are 'like people who for a long time looked out of a window without noticing the glass – and then one day began to notice this too.'²³ We have begun to question the nature of referential language, like the hero of Sartre's *La Nausee*, Roquentin, who experiences nausea when he realises that the word 'tree' bears no relation to the object which he is looking at. This self-consciousness creates distance between the signifier and the signified, making the representation of reality seem unachievable for the modern artist. The artist cannot hope to reproduce reality truthfully, but instead can construct and transform it. Artistic creation is a highly self-conscious process which depends on complicity between the artist and the reader in order to permit Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The naive realist 'tries to ignore the actual process of creation as much as possible'²⁴ whereas Murdoch repeatedly reminds us that *The Black Prince* is a work of fiction, destroying the illusion of the reality of the text in order to show life and art in the right relationship to each other.

²¹ Gabriel Pearson, 'Simultaneous and Quadratic,' *Guardian* 22 Feb. 1973.

²² Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 257.

²³ Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*, 27.

²⁴ Damien Grant, *Realism*, (London: Methuen, 1970) 71.

One example of this is Murdoch's frequent use of frame-breaking, when Bradley interrupts the narrative to address his 'dear friend', Loxias. Murdoch's foregrounding of the novel's fictional status seems to indicate her awareness that some transformation of reality by art is necessary. Moreover, this transformation can be seen as desirable, because through this process the artist is able to create a personal reality and a deeply felt truth.

In some ways Murdoch is working within the mainstream realist tradition. For example, in her use of two Bradleys – the earlier, blinded Bradley and the wiser Bradley who looks back on events – Murdoch employs the realist tradition of the unreliable narrator. However, in her experimentation with form Murdoch seems to be moving away from conventional realism to a fragmented reality which is closer to the incompleteness and contingency of life. Byatt observes that Murdoch is one of a growing number of novelists who 'are technically moving away from simple realism, from social analysis and precise delineation of the motives and emotions of individuals, to forms much more overtly and deliberately 'unreal'.'²⁵ She cites Muriel Spark and Angus Wilson as examples of novelists whose work draws attention to its fictive status. Thus Murdoch can be viewed not in isolation but as part of a broad movement of artists in the late twentieth century who remain rooted in the realist tradition but are radically experimenting with its possibilities as part of their search for ways to make language reflect the world.

Bradley's narrative is followed by a series of postscripts, written by 'dramatis personae': Bradley's ex-wife Christian, the 'psychological consultant' Francis Marloe, Arnold Baffin's wife and murderer Rachel, and Julian, now married and a professional writer. Each writer challenges Bradley's narrative and tries to exonerate him/herself from blame. Christian claims that Bradley had always been in love with her and that her rejection of him made him insane; Francis produces a superficial Freudian interpretation of Bradley's Oedipus complex, interpreting Arnold as a father-figure who Bradley loved and hated; Rachel also states that Bradley was in love with her, created a fantasy of love

²⁵ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* (London: Vintage, 1994) 323.

for her daughter as a substitution and revenge, and murdered Arnold out of jealousy; Julian acknowledges some truth in Bradley's account, says that 'the child I was loved the man Bradley was' (411), but finally endorses her mother's version of events. The postscripts have divided critics. Todd contends that they 'undermine any claim to veracity of Pearson's own narrative',²⁶ and Johnson agrees that they deconstruct Bradley's account and deconstruct one another, so every viewpoint is shown to be incomplete and partial.²⁷ Gordon, in contrast, maintains that the novel is not open-ended,²⁸ and Conradi similarly believes that although the postscripts appear to cast doubt on Bradley's version of events, they actually strengthen it.²⁹ This is because each postscript shows the writer to be exactly the kind of person that Bradley has previously implied. Christian and Rachel are proved to be self-centred and small-minded; Francis comes up with the vulgar Freudian reading which Bradley had predicted he would produce. Furthermore, the literariness of Julian's postscript makes it seem artificial and insincere, concerned above all with the 'concealment' which she has come to believe art is for (410).

Conradi's view seems persuasive, because the four writers' statements about art undermine their postscripts still more. What they say about art contradicts not only Bradley's thoughts but contradicts Murdoch's own personal beliefs about the value and truthfulness of good art. Christian claims 'we can live without art' (395). Francis believes that Bradley's art is self-deceiving: 'the psyche desperate for survival invents deep things' (399). For Rachel it is 'dreamy-fantasy-nonsense' (407). And Julian shows that she has lost her way when she bleakly asserts that 'art is concealment' and 'erotic love never inspires art' (410). It seems that although there may be elements of truth in what each writer says, overall we are being encouraged to discount them and to believe that

²⁶ Todd, *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest*, 33.

²⁷ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, 36.

²⁸ David J. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 56.

²⁹ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 237.

Bradley is a trustworthy voice. The final word is given to Bradley's 'editor', Loxias, whose postscript unambiguously endorses the views of both Bradley and Murdoch about good art: it 'tells the only truth that ultimately matters' (416). However, the competing voices and multiple perspectives offered in the postscripts assist Murdoch in the creation of the illusion of formlessness. This subtle manipulation of form is also discernible at the start of Bradley's narrative. Bradley debates where to begin his account, muses that '[w]here after all does anything begin?' (21), and eventually selects the arrival of Francis Marloe because he considers it to be the start of 'a deeper pattern'. However, the opening sentence which states that Arnold telephones to say that he has killed Rachel is in reality where the novel commences. This creates an underlying structural balance with the end of the novel where Rachel telephones Bradley, begs him to come to her house, and then reveals that she has killed Arnold. Thus Murdoch artfully conceals the form inherent in the novel, never allowing it to dominate.

Both Bradley and Murdoch seem haunted by the idea of self-purging through language. This is expressed most eloquently by Bradley in his impassioned interpretation of *Hamlet*. He declaims a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of the protagonist, who he perceives as an externalisation of Shakespeare's identity:

'*Hamlet* is words, and so is Hamlet. He is as witty as Jesus Christ, but whereas Christ speaks Hamlet is speech. He is the tormented empty sinful consciousness of man seared by the bright light of art, the god's flayed victim dancing the dance of creation. The cry of anguish is obscure because it is overheard. It is the eloquence of direct speech, it is *oratio recta* not *oratio obliqua*. But it is not addressed to us. Shakespeare is passionately exposing himself to the ground and author of his being. He is speaking as few artists can speak, in the first person and at the pinnacle of artifice.' (164)

At this moment Bradley seems to experience the 'direct shock of poetic intensity' which T. S. Eliot believes to be the impact of genuinely effective poetry which is able to 'communicate before it is understood.'³⁰ To Eliot, this intense experience seems to resemble the shock of seeing into the heart of light, the mystery of life. This idea is

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'Dante,' *Selected Essays 1917-32* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) 224.

contentious; Tony Davies comments that it is ‘based on a myth, namely, that there can be such a thing as a direct, unmediated encounter between reader and text.’³¹ Yet even if this is an impossible ideal, Bradley is deeply moved and uplifted by Shakespeare’s struggle to transcend language and by his own struggle to transcend the barrier between himself and Shakespeare’s text. Bradley’s clarity of vision soon becomes clouded by egoistic illusion, but the close attention which he has paid to something other has the effect of drawing him right out of himself. He seems intuitively to sense the meaning of the text, and utters his first original criticism, free from the theory which had been restricting his vision. His interpretation of *Hamlet* seems to have been pulled momentarily from the depths of his subconscious, and is not spoken of again in the novel. According to Bradley, ‘*Hamlet* is a wild act of audacity, a self-purging, a complete self-castigation in the presence of the god’ (200). The character of Hamlet has been used by Shakespeare to express the author’s own identity, yet that identity is also ripped apart, in an exquisitely painful unselfing. This paradox embodies a moment of perfection in which the artist comes into contact with divinity in order to achieve the impossible: there is no contradiction between words and things.

Moments after Julian has left him, Bradley is overwhelmed by the ‘astounding phenomenon’ of love (205). He believes that the object of his love is Julian, and he struggles with language in order to try to express the feelings with which he has been flooded: ‘I had fallen in love with Julian.’ The words are easily written down. But how to describe the thing itself?’ (205) The shock of love has torn him out of himself, dislocating his sense of self so that he feels ‘totally alienated and changed and practically discarnate’ (206). He believes himself to be experiencing ‘an overwhelming sense of reality, of being at last real and seeing the real’ (209). His vision seems briefly to have been enlarged by the experience of paying close attention to *Hamlet*. However, all too soon his ego recovers itself and begins to generate illusions once more. Despite his professed uncertainty about whether it is possible to describe the experience of love,

³¹ Tony Davies, ‘Endpiece,’ *The Waste Land*, ed. Tony Davies and Nigel Wood (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994) 140.

Bradley remains obsessed with the power of words which pour out of him as he wonders at his own capacity to feel emotion. Bradley claims that his love allows him to see Julian with an 'enlivened vision' far from the 'casual blinded consciousness of the person that I was' (207), but his perception of her in fact seems to be flawed by egoistic illusion. His love is highly self-conscious. He congratulates himself for his 'marvellous achievement of absolute love' and enjoys imagining himself as Julian's god-like creator: 'I felt that I was, at every instant, creating Julian and supporting her being with my own' (208). Byatt sees Julian as Bradley's 'master-mistress',³² and Gordon develops this line of thought when he places Julian within a series of androgynous characters in Murdoch's fiction, and claims that 'the love felt for these figures is not the recognition of another separate identity [. . .] It is, rather, the love of some idea or ideal in the lover's mind.'³³ Bradley's love of Shakespeare's achievement seems to have become diverted into an erotic love for Julian; he loves her as Hamlet rather than as herself, and his love therefore remains solipsistic because he loves her as a character who is an extension of himself, rather than as a separate being.

The novel is subtitled 'A Celebration of Love' and, as Loxias points out, erotic love can open our eyes to truth, just as art can (414). Bradley seems to believe that his love for Julian will be the saving ordeal for which he has been waiting. However, Murdoch shows her readers that erotic love can be dangerously ambiguous, because although it has the potential to illuminate reality, focus attention on the loved one and blot out the self - 'Human love is the gateway to all knowledge, as Plato understood' (390) - it also has the contradictory power to create delusion and cloud vision with egoism. Bradley's love for Julian transforms his perception of the world, to the extent that he is oblivious even to his sister's suffering: 'I had totally and absolutely forgotten Priscilla's existence' (249). Julian becomes the centre of his world, rendering all others invisible, and Priscilla is the casualty of his obsession. His lack of grip on reality becomes most shockingly clear when

³² Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 274.

³³ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, 48.

he decides to ‘obliterate from history’ the news of his sister’s death in order to prolong his secret holiday with Julian (326).

Bradley seems to want to align himself with Shakespeare by creating his own Hamlet, and has subconsciously elected Julian to take this role. Like Shakespeare, Bradley becomes a version of Marsyas, Apollo’s ‘flayed victim’ (199). He is punished, not just for aspiring to create a masterpiece, but for having the audacity to attempt to create life. Both acts are attempts to put himself on the same level as a god. He has created the myth of Hamlet as pure language, and becomes dominated by it, leading him to attempt to possess Julian, to express his identity through her, and finally to tear apart this identity when he rapes her. This is indicated in the way that he describes his aggression: ‘[t]he fury, the anger, was directed to myself through Julian. Or directed against fate through Julian and through myself. Yet of course this fury was love too, the power of the god, mad and alarming’ (329). This attempted self-purging causes Julian to feel ‘impersonal’, ‘shattered and empty’. Bradley observes that he has reduced her to ‘pure echoing emptiness’ and follows this by the declaration that ‘now, empowered, I would be able to create’ (331). Bradley thinks that he has now been through the test for which he was waiting: ‘Though still in the dark, I had come through my ordeal’ (331). He does not realise that the true ordeal of the trial still lies ahead.

Although erotic love prevents Bradley from perceiving Julian for herself, he is able to see through her in order to create his masterpiece. In Martha Nussbaum’s view it is as a recollecting artist, rather than as a lover, that Bradley is finally able to see her most clearly and accept her elusive reality.³⁴ He follows Proust by learning to detach himself from his love and to reflect on it in order to achieve greater clarity of vision and possess his love in his art. It is not until he is close to death that the secondary, wiser Bradley is finally able to accept Julian’s otherness:

‘I do not, my darling girl, however passionately and intensely my thought has

³⁴ Nussbaum, “‘Faint with Secret Knowledge’: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,’ 704.

worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you.' (392)

Purged of egotistical fantasy, Bradley has glimpsed the possibility of progressing through Eros and art in order to reach the perfection of silence. Although her character comes to realise the impossibility of equalling Shakespeare's achievement himself, in *The Black Prince* Murdoch has succeeded in extending the boundaries of her art through her attempts to perceive and articulate what she believes to be true, real and good.

Chapter Three: *THE SEA, THE SEA*: POWER, MAGIC AND METAFICTION

‘I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality.’¹

The Sea, The Sea is a tale of obsession, jealousy and guilt. In this novel Murdoch extends her investigation of the saint and the artist, the quest for the good, the difficulties of renouncing power, and the relationship between art and life. Whereas *The Black Prince* was a meditation on *Hamlet*, the themes which are central to *The Sea, The Sea* are also found in *The Tempest*. Once again Murdoch appears to be contemplating the supreme artist, Shakespeare, in order to explore what she believed to be the subject of all good art: ‘the pilgrimage from appearance to reality’.²

Charles Arrowby, the narrator, has retired from a life immersed in the power games of the theatre and now naively pictures himself as Prospero: ‘I shall abjure magic and become a hermit’ (2). Charles’s jealous desire for power and control resurfaces when he discovers that his first love Mary Hartley Smith is now married and living nearby. Although he has not seen Hartley since she parted from him over forty years ago, Charles convinces himself that she is the means by which he will regain the lost innocence of his youth. Charles persists in frantically constructing his self-absorbed fantasy despite the advice of other characters. However, events overtake him, and following his own near-death by drowning and magical rescue by his cousin James, the death of Hartley’s adopted son Titus, and Hartley’s final escape by emigration, the novel ends with Charles back in London. He eventually makes some moral progress, as shown by his belated attempts to try to see James and Hartley more clearly, and he slowly and painfully comes to realise the inability of art to control and shape life.

Murdoch’s continued experimentation with structure, form and narrative voice in

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978) 499.

² Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 14.

The Sea, The Sea has been an enduring focus of critical attention,³ and this area of critical debate is particularly valuable because it helps to situate Murdoch within the context of postmodernism. Although none of these features are new or exclusive to postmodern fiction, there are a number of dominant elements in *The Sea, The Sea* which might seem to connect it with a postmodern aesthetic. For example, Murdoch repeatedly draws attention to the fictional status of the text, leading the reader to reconceptualise what is meant by 'realism'. She experiments with a first-person retrospective narrator, showing us that narrative is not 'natural', but always selective and partial. It is deeply ironic that Charles unwittingly subverts his intended meanings and makes us doubt his reliability. Because we are presented with both an inside and outside view of Charles, we are disturbed by his monstrous egoism but can also feel some empathy and understanding of his behaviour. Furthermore, the text offers numerous intertextual references, most evidently to *The Tempest*, and these references might seem to offer a clear way of 'explaining' the text but in fact prove resistant to a simple mapping of the master-narrative onto the novel. Murdoch has produced a writerly text which draws attention to the process of interpretation, making the reader work in order to produce his/her own meanings from it and thereby focussing on the reader's own unselfing as well as that of the characters.

Although Murdoch is committed to working within the realist tradition, she appears to be continually aware of its 'unreality', its various artificial conventions, and this causes her work to be characterised by contradiction and creative tensions. Her foregrounding, through a range of devices, of the artificiality of the text paradoxically allows her to create art which is a more accurate representation of the formless, contingent real world. I wish to focus in particular on three key aspects of Murdoch's innovation: *The Sea, The Sea*'s highly original narrative method, Murdoch's examination of the presentation of the individual in relation to reality, and also on the novel's intertextual connections to *The*

³ Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001); Elizabeth Dipple, *Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen, 1982); Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987); Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004).

Tempest, which illuminate Murdoch's exploration of the relationships between art and life, illusion and reality.

The study of narrative form in *The Sea*, *The Sea* foregrounds Murdoch's exploration of the dividing line between art and life. Charles is highly preoccupied with the form that his narrative will take, and is more self-conscious than even Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince* about his role as narrator. Dipple notes the egoism inherent in Charles's pretentious deliberations over the form which his writing will take.⁴ He is writing something which he variously refers to as a diary, memoirs, philosophical journal, and later comes to describe as a novel and story. 'So I am writing my life, after all, as a novel! Why not? It was a matter of finding a form, and somehow history, my history, has found the form for me' Charles asserts (153), although he fails to understand the significance of James's warning: 'You've made it into a story, and all stories are false' (335). Because Charles is unable to deal with the whole of reality, he consoles himself by attempting to make his life into an art object which can be contemplated and controlled through the act of writing. He selects aspects of his real and imagined pasts in order to construct the story of 'Charles and Hartley'. This fantasy can be perceived as a fall-myth which Charles allows himself to become dominated by, just as Bradley Pearson becomes dominated by the myth of Hamlet as pure language, a character to be re-created and possessed.

To Bran Nicol,⁵ Charles's constant deliberations about form are due to his efforts to find a way to create connections between past and present and thus realise his fantasy of repossessing and reconstructing the past. The first-person retrospective narrative voice seems to offer this possibility, and is therefore unsettling for the reader who is subtly led to collude with Charles's distorted world-view. Conradi⁶ observes that whereas in *The Black Prince* Murdoch relies on the convention of the wiser Bradley who from time to time interrupts and comments on the narrative of the foolish, earlier Bradley, in *The Sea*,

⁴ Dipple, *Work for the Spirit*, 275.

⁵ Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, 153.

⁶ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 294.

The Sea 'Charles's self-deceptions have to speak through his confessional' and so both narrator and reader are denied the privileges of hindsight. Charles's narrating self can watch and appear to co-exist with his experiencing self, moulding and shaping reality yet giving the illusion of a natural innocent narrative: 'The past and the present are after all so close, almost one, as if time were an artificial teasing out of a material which longs to join, to interpenetrate' (153). Although Charles is seduced by the idea that he can seamlessly integrate past and present, Murdoch reminds the attentive reader that they can only be 'almost one'. Even the act of writing creates distance between Charles's narrating self and his experiencing self.⁷

Nicol reflects on the intertextual links between *The Sea*, *The Sea* and Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* which both deal with obsessive love and a journey out of illusion. Furthermore, both texts are centred on the desire to recapture time through art. Murdoch seems drawn to this idea, yet is aware of its shortcomings. Charles attempts to produce a tightly-constructed, crystalline work which will allow him to write about his life in a selective way and thereby turn it into an art object. Ironically, people and events overtake him, and this is hinted to the reader early on when he describes his work as 'this creature to which I am giving life and which seems already to have a will of its own' (2). The most significant and troubling interruption to his imposition of form is the sea-monster which breaks the surface of his narrative on the very first page:

'I had written the above, destined to be the opening paragraph of my memoirs, when something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it.' (1)

Artifice is repeatedly disrupted by the real, meaning that Charles is never permitted the consolation of form. Eventually he progresses to the point where he can gain some perspective: '[h]ow much I see, as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality' (499). In *A la Recherche*, past and present can co-exist in 'psychic time', whereas Charles very slowly comes to realise that narrative form does

⁷ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, 47.

not have this connective power. Past and present cannot be conflated, because all narrative is by its very nature retrospective. Charles learns to accept that he will never be able to inhabit his earlier self: 'The past buries the past and must rest in silence' (500). Charles's search for the lost innocence of his past is therefore shown to be an impossible quest, which is defined by Nicol as *Sehnsuchen*, the longing to return to a place one has never known, and by Peter Mathews, who reveals the surprising extent to which Murdoch seems to have been affected by Friedrich Nietzsche's thought, as *ressentiment*.⁸ Charles eventually has to acknowledge that his desire to rewrite an ideal past with Hartley has no right to exist.

In her essay 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' Murdoch expresses her concerns about the modern novel, and comments that two extremes have developed: the crystalline novel and the journalistic novel. The result of this is that '[w]e are offered things or truths. What we have lost is persons.'⁹ She suggests that novelists must try to revive the naturalistic conception of character which is found in the work of nineteenth-century novelists, above all Eliot and Tolstoy: 'ultimately we judge the greatest novelists by the quality of their awareness of others'. Charles, the aspiring novelist, resoundingly fails to comprehend the reality of other people. He is half-aware of this failure. For example, when musing on the relationship between himself and James, he says 'we could not both be real' (57) and then acknowledges the limitations of his sketch of his cousin: 'it is quite stylish. Is it true however? Well, it is not totally misleading, but it is far too short and 'smart'. How can one describe real people?' (68). Lizzie tells Charles 'you don't respect people as people, you don't *see* them, you're not really a teacher, you're a sort of rapacious magician' (45), which reminds us of Charles's self-conscious, glib identification with Prospero and also of his failure to comprehend that character's more sinister, manipulative qualities. Murdoch has commented elsewhere

⁸ Peter Mathews, 'A Subterranean Dialogue with Nietzsche on the Demonic and Divine in *The Sea, The Sea*,' *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination: Essays*, ed. Simone Roberts and Alison Scott-Baumann (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010) 190.

⁹ Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 264.

on the way that people often 'like to be bullied by some kind of quasi-fiction which they set going in their own environment',¹⁰ and Charles is surrounded by such people, who are very willing to assist in him the development of his myth by taking on supporting roles. For example, Lizzie sees herself as his Ariel: 'I want you to be the lord and king as you've always been' (189). Similarly, Gilbert begs to be permitted to work for Charles in a Caliban-like role, saying 'I often think I have the soul of a slave' (241).

Caliban and Ariel are often understood as representing aspects of Prospero's own being.¹¹ Likewise, Charles's attempts to subject individuals to his will, to diminish and control them, mean that they become menacing projections of his own consciousness. In this sense his writing is typical of what Murdoch calls 'neurotic Romantic literature' in which the author attempts to 'work out his own salvation by an exercise in self-discovery',¹² constructing a myth around himself which prevents him from perceiving the reality of others. His vast egoism even leads him to try to appropriate the sea in order to make it into an extension of himself, as indicated through his repeated use of the first-person pronoun: 'my yellow rocks' (2), 'my sportive sea' (6), 'my various pools' (7). He tries to capture its beauty through 'word-pictures' (2) but his use of language is inevitably insufficient to express its reality. His lack of awareness of the concept of contingency leads him to keep trying to interpret the sea which resists all his attempts to impose meaning on it. Johnson has commented that Charles does not realise that when he is contemplating the sea he is contemplating himself,¹³ and there is a great deal of evidence to support this view. For example, the opening lines of *The Sea, The Sea* comprise a detailed description of the sea which, like Charles's closed mind, 'the bright

¹⁰ Christopher Bigsby, 'Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 115.

¹¹ Ruth Nevo, 'Subtleties of the Isle: The Tempest,' *The Tempest: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. R. S. White (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 80.

¹² Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 266.

¹³ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, 48.

sunshine cannot penetrate' (1). The reader is informed that the sea laps with 'mechanical self-satisfaction' (15) and is 'a compact radiant complacent sort of sea' (67). More disturbingly, the 'monster rising from the waves' (19) can be interpreted as something repressed and unrecognisable, buried deep within Charles's psyche. As Nicol observes,

'the sea monster can plausibly be explained as many things: a symbol of jealousy, an emotion central to the book, or [. . .] a displaced expression of the fear of human sexuality. But what makes this image so effective is that it has the power to absorb all of these interpretations and still seem to represent something more. We are left in the same position as Charles, trying to signify the traumatic kernel at the heart of the novel'.¹⁴

It is deeply ironic that what Charles says about the sea and its monster casts light on his own character, yet he does not ever fully realise this because he does not pay it sufficient attention. In the end, like Valery's narrator in *Le Cimetiere Marin*, Charles gives up his attempts to interpret the sea and turns away from it, back to the everyday world.

Byatt notes that the unsustainable vision of the universe freed from selfish personal desire is often glimpsed by Murdoch's characters when they come face to face with the sea.¹⁵ To Immanuel Kant, the experience of the sublime is a spiritual experience of 'the upsetting glimpse of the boundlessness of nature'¹⁶ which creates conflict between imagination and reason. 'What is vast and formless in nature, or vast and powerful and terrifying, can occasion a sense of sublimity',¹⁷ and this seems to be what James is referring to when he tells Charles that the sea is sublime 'in the strict sense' (330) although Charles once again fails to pay sufficient attention to what he says. Immense, amorphous, powerful and constantly in flux, the sea has no absolutes. In contrast, Charles has made Hartley an artificial absolute in order to give his life the illusion of a central meaning: 'Everything I did now had to relate to that one world-centre' (140). Charles is

¹⁴ Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, 138.

¹⁵ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* (London: Vintage, 1994) 283.

¹⁶ Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 268.

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good,' 45.

repeatedly offered experiences of the sublime which counter his obsession and sometimes have a momentary impact on him. For example, as he lies on the rocks between the sea and the night sky, he realises that

‘[a]ll was movement, all was change, and somehow this was visible and yet unimaginable. And I was no longer I but something pinned down as an atom, an atom of an atom, a necessary captive spectator, a tiny mirror into which it was all indifferently beamed, as it motionlessly seethed and boiled, gold behind gold behind gold’ (146).

Here Charles is briefly taken out of himself and begins to see his insignificance in relation to the reality of nature. He drifts into sleep, and wakes in a state of fear and loneliness, because the experience of the sublime has dislocated his sense of self: ‘I saw myself as a dark figure in the midst of this empty awfully silent dawn, where light was scarcely yet light, and I was afraid of myself’ (146). This experience has presented Charles with a fleeting awareness of a deeper reality, but elsewhere Murdoch shows how even the sublime can be ambiguous and open to misinterpretation, inflating the importance of the ego. At the end of the ‘History’ section, bereft of Hartley, Titus and James, Charles once again lies on the rocks by the sea and falls asleep watching ‘the vast soft interior of the universe which was slowly and gently turning itself inside out’ (475), a sublime vision which resembles Charles’s inversion of reality and fantasy. Again he wakes to a sensation of fear, then realises that the seals which he had always hoped to see are unexpectedly swimming close to the rocks. This is interpreted by Gordon as a suggestion of new innocence,¹⁸ but it also seems possible that Charles’s certainty that ‘they were beneficent beings come to visit me and bless me’ is a suggestion of his resurfacing egoism.

Murdoch extends Kant’s theory of the sublime so that it relates not just to nature but to the experience of good art, and most importantly of all to the spectacle of human life:

‘It is indeed the realisation of a vast and varied reality outside ourselves which

¹⁸ David J. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch’s Fables of Unselfing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 45.

brings about a sense initially of terror, and when properly understood of exhilaration and spiritual power. But what brings this experience to us, in its most important form, is the sight, not of physical nature, but of our surroundings as consisting of other individual men.’¹⁹

Antonaccio notes how Murdoch uses Kant’s theory of the sublime as ‘an opening for the proper recognition of the reality of others’.²⁰ This forms part of her development of a new conception of the individual, in which man is ‘free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn.’²¹ Charles sees himself as set against a background of reality, not realising that in fact he, like all human beings, is sunk in it and part of it. The perception of how other people are endlessly different from ourselves brings about a more accurate, truthful vision of reality. Ironically, Charles’s real moral advancement takes place away from the sublime spectacle of nature, back in London in James’s flat. It is not until the final pages of *The Sea, The Sea* that he begins to realise that he had never been able to see ‘the real Hartley’ and that even after she had left him for the final time he continued to weave illusions about her: ‘I began, with the half-conscious cunning so characteristic of the self-protective human ego, to see her as a poor hysterical shrew’ (499). Charles becomes slightly more conscious of his failure to see others clearly than that other monster of egoism, Effingham Cooper in *The Unicorn*, who satisfies his ego by convincing himself that the object of his unrequited love, Hannah, is in fact ‘a doomed figure, a Lilith, a pale death-dealing enchantress, anything but a human being.’²² Unlike Effingham, Charles is dimly conscious that love leads to the discovery of reality:

‘[m]y new, my second love for her, my second ‘innings’, seemed at its height a thing sublime, even without illusion, when I had seen her as so pitiful, so broken,

¹⁹ Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,’ 268.

²⁰ Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 104.

²¹ Iris Murdoch, ‘Against Dryness,’ *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990) 19.

²² Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963) 268.

and yet as something which I could cherish' (492).

However, this realisation is still too painful for him, and it is quickly undermined by the assertion that '[s]he is gone, she is nothing, for me she no longer exists' (492). Charles's very slowly developing awareness of the necessity of seeing the reality of others is an indication that the discovery of the true sublime, just and loving knowledge of the individual, is 'a task which does not come to an end.'²³

Charles's self-identification with Prospero has already been noted. However, Murdoch resists making *The Tempest* into a master-narrative which 'explains' the novel, as Homer's *Odyssey* in some sense does for Joyce's *Ulysses*. Like *Hamlet* in *The Black Prince*, the novel resonates with references to *The Tempest*, some of which may be simply playful. Nevertheless, reading *The Sea*, *The Sea* in relation to *The Tempest* is illuminating because the texts meditate on similar themes - magic, power, reconciliation, and the figure of the dangerous enchanter - and both are positioned on the dividing line between illusion and reality.

Charles wants to see himself as Prospero, but his fantasy of omnipotence clouds his vision, preventing him from paying sufficient attention to the negative aspects of this character.²⁴ Ironically, he is much more like Prospero than he realises. Prospero is filled with pride, rivalry, and an obsessive desire for revenge. He imagines that he can reorder his life, but is ambivalent about what he wants to do and is in conflict with himself: 'with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury / Do I take part.'²⁵ Prospero's power is constantly being threatened by contingency. He cannot control and order any thing or person who is unwilling to be ordered, meaning that he fails with his brother Antonio, who even at the close of the play seems to show no sign of remorse. Neither Prospero nor Charles is able to arrest time, because even a 'sea-change' is only temporary. However, Prospero realises

²³ Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 269.

²⁴ Dipple, *Work for the Spirit*, 285.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Anne Righter (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983) V.1.26 - 7.

his limitations whereas Charles does not. Charles's identification with Prospero moreover implies that he aligns himself with Shakespeare who is often perceived as speaking through Prospero. Thus it appears that Charles's rampant egoism leads him to attempt the creation of a work of art in which he is both the leading character and the creator. In his hubris he resembles Bradley Pearson, another egoist who tries to emulate Shakespeare by re-creating and possessing his own Hamlet. Through her examination of Charles and Prospero, Murdoch may be confronting the problematic will to power which she perceives in herself. The impossibility of the artist's renunciation of power is an issue to which she constantly returns.

Charles self-consciously and naively believes that his retirement to the sea mirrors the end of *The Tempest*, because he has given up power, and will 'abjure magic and become a hermit' (2). By the end of the novel he realises that 'one surrenders power in one form, and grasps it in another' (500). To Stephen Orgel, Prospero never actually gives up power but in fact carefully preserves his authority. All his actions are directed towards the resumption of his dukedom, and the achievement of the highly political marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand which will ensure that when Prospero dies Milan will become part of the kingdom of Naples: '[h]is grave is the ultimate triumph over his brother.'²⁶ Prospero returns to the intrigues of the court, as Charles returns to the power games of the theatre. Charles's ordeals have by the end of the novel allowed him to make very slow progression in his moral development, and he is at last able to acknowledge 'the inward ravages of jealousy, remorse, fear and the consciousness of irretrievable moral failure' (483), rather like Prospero who finally accepts that the dark and primitive Caliban is a part of himself.²⁷

The Tempest is deeply concerned with its own nature as a play. The embedding of plays within the play requires the audience to keep changing between fictional reality and

²⁶ Stephen Orgel, 'Prospero's Wife,' *The Tempest: Contemporary Critical Essays*. ed. R. S. White (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 29.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.1.275 - 6.

fictional illusion, which complicates our response. When Prospero states that ‘these our actors . . . were all spirits, and / Are melted into air’,²⁸ he speaks both of the actors in the pageant and the actors on the stage, collapsing levels of representation, merging the world of the theatre and the world of the audience and making us understand that reality is constantly shifting. This bewildering, defamiliarising effect becomes still more pronounced at the end of the play. Elizabethan plays typically ended with an appeal to the audience, in which an actor would step out of his role in order to create closure by acknowledging the artificiality of the play which had just been performed, distancing it from the superior reality of the audience. *The Tempest* deviates from this tradition, because in the epilogue it is Prospero, not the actor who plays this role, who speaks to the audience. The character has suddenly become aware that he has been participating in a performance:

‘Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell:
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.’²⁹

Thus the audience is involved in this illusion and is drawn into a shared reality which continues beyond the formal end of the play.³⁰ The postscript of *The Sea, The Sea* also undermines the reader’s expectations, because we are refused the closure that we would anticipate from a realist text. The novel meanders on, refusing to end, creating the illusion of formlessness. This method was criticised by some of the novel’s first critics, who commented that ‘for the last eighty pages or so one is too conscious of the novel as marathon runner, flagging and increasingly breathless’³¹ and ‘it would have seemed

²⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.1.148-150.

²⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*: Epilogue 5-10.

³⁰ Anne Richter, Introduction, *The Tempest*, ed. Anne Richter (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983) 51.

³¹ Francis King, ‘Love’s Spell and Black Magic,’ *Spectator*, 26 Aug.1978.

possible to add a last squib to send us all reeling.’³² On the other hand, the ending can be seen as daringly realistic, suggesting the inability of art to compel life. Charles realises that ‘[h]uman arrangements are nothing but loose ends and hazy reckoning, whatever art may otherwise pretend in order to console us’ (477). He observes ‘of course loose ends can never be properly tied’ (477) and he goes on producing new loose ends right up to the final page of the novel, which ends with the question ‘what next, I wonder?’ (502) reflecting the drifting, contingent reality of Charles’s continuing life.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the postscripts in *The Black Prince* subtly validate Bradley’s version of events and make it clear how we are meant to interpret the novel. However, this is unlikely to be apparent on a first reading of the novel, and the disparate, competing voices carefully create the illusion of formlessness. In *The Sea, The Sea* also, pattern is artfully manipulated and never permitted to dominate. The ending seems unstructured, yet Charles’s drift back towards the power games of his earlier life in the theatre has an underlying circularity which reminds the reader that reality is like the sea of ‘Le Cimetiere Marin’, ‘toujours recommencee’.

In her valuable chapter on endings in Murdoch’s novels,³³ Johnson claims that in the postscript Charles’s voice merges imperceptibly with the author’s, conflating the dramatised and omniscient modes of narration and reinforcing the impression that endings are arbitrary in both life and art: ‘That no doubt is how the story ought to end, with the seals and the stars [. . .] However, life, unlike art, has an irritating way of bumping and limping on’ (477). This seems to resemble the way that Shakespeare is often assumed to be speaking through Prospero, an interpretation given strength by *The Tempest*’s constant allusions to the theatre and its position as one of his last plays, meaning that it is frequently seen as Shakespeare’s ‘farewell to the stage’ even though he continued to write after its completion. The presence of the author in the text further

³² Rachel Billington, ‘Peering into the Murdoch Mist,’ *Financial Times* 25 Aug. 1978.

³³ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, Chapter 5.

complicates the response of the reader or audience, because the text is once again identified with the real world. Near the beginning of *The Sea, The Sea*, when Charles is newly gripped by his obsession, James tells his inattentive cousin that '[p]eople lie so, even old men do. Though in a way, if there is art enough it doesn't matter, since there is another kind of truth in the art' (175). At a late stage, Charles realises that Shakespeare's plays are 'the place where magic does not shrink reality' (482). Although *The Tempest* and *The Sea, The Sea* are works of art, they both contain a profound truth to reality which we are led to become part of, as the barriers between art and life disintegrate.

Chapter Four: *THE GOOD APPRENTICE*: AN ENDLESS PILGRIMAGE

‘Of course one *works* at things in one’s mind, one doesn’t want to think that what happens ‘does nothing’ or ‘doesn’t matter’, as if it was wasted, it’s much more comforting if it’s part of one’s fate or one’s deep being somehow. Perhaps that working is a kind of magic [. . .] It’s dangerous, but I don’t see how we could get on without it.’¹

The Good Apprentice deals with the themes of recovery from the past, the destruction and regrowth of the ego, and the deep-seated human desire to give life meaning by seeking out an illusory centre. Although there are no religious certainties or moral imperatives in Murdoch’s world, many of its characters are seeking just judgement and forgiveness. A reworking of the prodigal son parable, the novel’s primary focus is on the characters of Edward and Stuart, two young men who have been brought up as brothers. Edward, who is unwittingly responsible for the death of his best friend, sinks into despair and embarks on a quest to discover his natural father, Jesse, and ask for his forgiveness. Although Edward seeks to invest his father with the authority of God, the once powerful enchanter Jesse is eventually found helpless and dying, trapped in a web of illusion. Stuart, the elder brother, wants to be good, and has given up a promising career in order to seek out the best way in which to achieve this. He is one of Murdoch’s eccentric, saintly figures, who often inspire antagonism in others. The confrontation of the saintly Stuart and the artist Jesse is a climactic moment in the novel. At the close, like most of Murdoch’s characters, Edward and Stuart seem to remain far from free of illusion.² The reader is shown that the concept of the quest is deceptive, being an attempt to impose form and create meaning where none exists. However, the brothers’ quests for meaning are inextricably linked to the endless task of learning to see

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985) 518.

² Christopher Bigsby, ‘Interview with Iris Murdoch,’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 108.

the world with a truthful and loving vision. The need for a quest is part of human nature, but the focus of the quest is constantly redefined in the infinitely slow and painful journey from appearance to reality.

In contrast to the highly innovative experimentation with form, structure and narrative voice found in *The Sea*, *The Sea* and *The Black Prince*, *The Good Apprentice* appears surprisingly archaic, resembling a nineteenth-century novel in its conventional storytelling, verbosity, large cast of characters and authoritative, moralising narrative stance. Critics often emphasise Murdoch's apparently direct line of continuity from this tradition and perceive particular similarities to the novels of George Eliot.³ These assumptions about Murdoch's aims and ambitions have resulted in some negative criticism. Harold Bloom comments with regard to her use of frequent authorial intervention, 'what worked sublimely for Eliot cannot work so well for Miss Murdoch'.⁴ However, to many critics it is one of the best of Murdoch's late novels. David J. Gordon admires its 'strong simplicity and its acceptance of magic'.⁵ Peter Conradi observes 'for bold simplicity of theme as well as complexity in its handling, *The Good Apprentice* excels',⁶ and both A. S. Byatt and A. N. Wilson admiringly draw parallels with late Shakespearean romance.⁷ Within the confines of this chapter I wish to consider two key areas. Firstly I will focus on Murdoch's use of the quest topos and its ultimate inadequacy as a metaphor for living. Murdoch's exploration of the quest reflects her

³ David J. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995) 3; A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* (London: Vintage, 1994) 322.

⁴ Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Iris Murdoch*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 5.

⁵ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, 165.

⁶ Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001) 331.

⁷ Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 291; A. N. Wilson, 'A Prodigal Novelist,' *Spectator* 28 Sep. 1985.

deep ambivalence towards the Freudian theory of substitution. The novel shows that we are enslaved by unconscious impulses which cause us to repeat patterns, substituting one illusion for another. The achievement of freedom from this deadly repetition is incredibly difficult but can be assisted by close attention to signs which point beyond themselves to offer a glimpse of truth and reality. I will explore one such example in more detail. I will then turn to a discussion of the novel's narrative method. Close examination reveals that Murdoch does far more than simply recreate the technique of nineteenth-century novelists. Rather, she rejuvenates the tradition, continuing to innovate and question our assumptions about the novelist's ability to tell the truth. In her concern with the relationship between life and art she is profoundly modern. Murdoch endlessly grapples with the difficulties involved in her position as an artist, and uses her fiction as a testing ground for her beliefs. As discussed previously, in *The Black Prince* Murdoch stages a debate between the crystalline and journalistic novel which can be interpreted as part of her attempt to find a middle way which combines the best of the two forms, and in both *The Black Prince* and *The Sea*, *The Sea* she tests the relationship between art and life to the point where language seems to turn against itself. *The Good Apprentice* shows Murdoch continuing to investigate the artist's struggle with magic. However, she can be perceived in this novel as finally coming to terms with this conflict, realising that art cannot reach perfection, although this is no reason to give up striving for it. This ongoing process of searching, questioning and struggling against the self can be viewed as the strongest aspect of Murdoch's achievement.⁸

Murdoch observes in *The Sovereignty of Good* 'any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy or incomplete.'⁹ The quest, in which a character invests his/her actions with mythical

⁸ David J. Gordon, 'Iris Murdoch's Comedies of Unselfing,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 36. 2, 1990: 117, 131.

⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 87.

significance, desiring to believe in destiny rather than contingency, is a recurring subject in the novels. It often forms part of a fantasy of redeeming the past. For example, in *The Sea*, Charles' attempts to rescue Hartley are motivated by the belief that their reunion will revive the lost innocence of youth. In *The Good Apprentice*, both Stuart and Edward undertake quests. Whereas Stuart's strategy is to wait for a sign which will indicate the right 'cage of duties' (51), Edward endows his natural father Jesse with the power to grant him absolution, and sets out to be reunited with him: 'here was no accident [. . .] he had come to Seegard as to a place of pilgrimage, carrying his woeful sin to a holy shrine and to a holy man' (119). The use of heightened figurative language signals his self-deception. As the novel progresses, the reader is shown the inadequacy of the quest as a model for living. This is shown in the way that Edward keeps re-enacting his quest, with erotic substitutions. After he inadvertently causes Mark's death, Edward becomes obsessed with the fantasy that he could beg forgiveness from Mark's ghost (11). When he decides to go to Seegard, Jesse becomes for Edward 'a most ambiguous love-object',¹⁰ 'a master, a precious king, a divine lover, a strange mysterious infinitely beloved object, the prize of a religious search, a jewel in a cave' (296). Edward realises in a moment of insight that 'I was in love with Mark - and now I'm in love with Jesse' (202). Once Jesse has gone, Edward seizes upon a new quest, imagining himself to be in love with Brownie Wilsden, Mark's sister: 'He was starting again, with nothing in the world left to do except to find Brownie and be with her - tell her everything and lay all his burdens down at her feet' (500-1). Murdoch shows us that picturing the world in terms of one's own desires has a dangerously distorting effect. When it becomes clear that Edward has omitted to pay attention to Brownie's reading of her own story, and that she is now engaged to a mutual acquaintance and planning to live in America, the realisation that '[s]he had needed him for her 'ritual'. [. . .] She was not really part of Edward's story at all, it had all been contrived and imagined' (507) causes him intense shock and suffering. Murdoch emphasises that this is the pain of being forced to confront reality

¹⁰ Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) 15.

without the consolation of comforting fictions generated by the ego: 'I haven't any being left, it's all been scraped away. I'm a raw rotting wound. It seemed as if something was happening, but I was having a dream, now I'm back in reality' (511).

Roland Barthes claims that every narrative is a quest for knowledge: '[t]he pleasure of the text is . . . an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end), if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father'.¹¹ Teresa de Lauretis explores this concept further, observing that every narrative has a movement forward towards resolution and backwards into the past and is therefore overlaid with an 'Oedipal logic' epitomised in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.¹² This drive forwards and backwards can be found in many of Murdoch's novels. Freud uses Oedipus as an emblem of Everyman's passage into adult life, and interprets the Oedipus quest positively because it involves finding other loved objects as a substitute for parents and this in his view is a sign of healthy growth and adaptation. In contrast, Murdoch treats this theory ironically due to her belief that it is human nature to simply substitute one illusion for another. In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* the demonic Julian observes:

'Human beings are roughly constructed entities full of indeterminacies and vaguenesses and empty spaces. Driven along by their own private needs they latch blindly onto each other, then pull away, then clutch again. Their little sadisms and their little masochisms are surface phenomena. Anyone will do to play the roles. They never really see each other at all. There is no relationship [. . .] which cannot quite easily be broken and there is none the breaking of which is a matter of any genuine seriousness. Human beings are essentially finders of substitutes.'¹³

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 10.

¹² Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984) 124-5.

¹³ Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970) 233.

This statement, according to Conradi, is ‘the heart of Murdoch’s grimly comic aesthetic’,¹⁴ the premise on which all her fiction is based. Murdoch has been criticised for her limited range of characters,¹⁵ but in fact this restricted range allows her to explore innumerable substitutions as, like the puppet-master Julius, she pushes her characters into endlessly different roles and relationships. Edward begins to develop a tentative awareness of his condition and to begin very slowly and painfully to move away from fantasy towards reality, but Murdoch shows us that at the end of the novel he is still trapped in a cycle of repetition, poised to embark on a new quest in search of his mother: ‘suddenly in his mind he saw his mother Chloe [. . .]. He thought, I’ll talk to Harry about her, I’ll find out all about her, I’ve never done that’ (519). Murdoch implies that freedom from the unconscious impulses which trap us in patterns of repetition is extremely difficult to achieve. It requires far more than the effort of will envisaged by Sartre. Edward is half-aware of ‘the natural ego growing again’ (517) which, ironically, forms part of his healing process. Glimpses of reality are shown to be too painful for human consciousness to cope with for long, and the ego therefore provides a place for the generation of dreams and illusions which will provide protection from this pain.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Murdoch indicates that freedom from constant substitution of one illusion for another can be achieved by paying close attention to signs which give the apprehension of something particular outside us, opening up our awareness and bringing us closer to reality. These signs offer flashes of reality which can penetrate even the mist-shrouded world of Seegard, ‘a magical otherworld, a dangerous earthly paradise’¹⁶ created by Jesse and maintained by his wife May and their daughters Bettina and Ilona. Seegard at first seems to be an idyllic place. May claims that it is a ‘paradise’ whose inhabitants ‘stand for creativity and peace, continuity and cherishing’ (161) but it eventually

¹⁴ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 203.

¹⁵ Bloom, *Iris Murdoch*, 2.

¹⁶ Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 291.

becomes evident that its original beauty has been corrupted: music has been forgotten, the looms are never used, and books gather dust. Ilona tells Edward: ‘There was something great here once, but we’re just carrying it on mechanically in a pretend way’ (200). The house has now become a prison in which the women attempt to conceal the half-mad Jesse. Despite its falsity, Seegard is not wholly detrimental to Edward. In his state of extreme suffering, it gives him occupation and some temporary respite from continuous rehearsals of his pain. Stephen Medcalf comments on Seegard’s ‘innocence and charm’ and observes that its healing power is indicated by the change in the seasons from winter to summer during Edward’s time there.¹⁷ To Conradi, ‘[t]he sudden and shocking translation out of a believable contemporary London into the Seegard world has a Shakespearean *bravura* about it, like a piece of comic mock-pastoral in one of the romances’,¹⁸ and like Shakespeare’s pastorals Seegard offers an imaginative space for escape and dreaming, fantasy and disguise. However, whereas in Shakespeare deception leads to clarity and understanding, Seegard’s deceptions veil the truth and have a harmful effect. It is a world of constant transitions where perception becomes clouded by illusion: May seems more like a sister than a mother to Edward, Jesse is more like a lover than a father, and Ilona may or may not be Edward’s sister. Its sedative magic begins to deprive Edward of his sense of reality, ‘making him forget Mark’s death, unhappen it’ (177). The instinctive reaction of Stuart, who seeks the path to the Good, seems most clear-sighted: he is appalled by the atmosphere of Seegard. ‘He felt as if he were breathing in falsity and would soon be *made* of it, as *they* were, as Edward even was coming to be. He had felt, as he said, that he could ‘do no good’ there’ (331).

Whilst caught in the midst of Seegard’s fantasy, Edward discovers a sign which offers him a revelation, making him momentarily perceive the falsity surrounding him and to

¹⁷ Stephen Medcalf, ‘Towards Respect for Reality,’ *Times Literary Supplement* 27 Sep. 1985.

¹⁸ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 334.

realise with sudden joy the reality which exists outside. He finds a volume of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and reads a sentence at random:

‘The French sentence came to him with an extraordinary freshness, like a breath of clear air to a man just out of prison, like a sudden sound of a musical instrument. Intimations of other places, of elsewhere - of freedom. He felt as he read it a kind of invigorating self-reproach and a new sort of power. There too he lived, he himself. He was there.’ (278)

Moments later, this insight is swallowed up by fresh illusion, as Edward is overwhelmed by new emotion when he reads a letter from Brownie Wilsden which he eagerly interprets as ‘a pure authentic voice’, ‘the order of reprieve’. Murdoch shows the reader that signs can be ambiguous. In this case, the sign is a false consolation which prevents Edward from paying close attention to the good which lies beyond it. His desire for judgement and forgiveness leads him to tell himself: ‘I’ll put it all on to her, she will *deal* with it all’ (281). In spite of this distracting fantasy of redemption by his dead friend’s sister, Edward is shown to return to Proust at the end of the novel, pondering *A la Recherche*’s curious mixture of pain and joy which he remains determined to comprehend (521). Thus for Edward Proust seems to function as a private, personal sign of reality and truth, and Murdoch seems to imply that it bodes well for him that he wishes to retain it and study it with attention in the future. Nevertheless, Edward is unable to trace in his own copy of Proust the sentence which he had read at Seegard, turns instead to the beginning and misquotes the first sentence. This is intriguing, suggesting perhaps a simple error on the part of the character or author, or alternatively hinting at the facility with which we distort signs through lack of attention. At the end of the novel, Edward has made some progress on his path to the good, but still has a long way to go.

When he arrives, Edward does not know how to look at Seegard, and is dimly conscious that it is partly the product of his own desires and therefore not separate from himself: ‘As Edward stared at Seegard he felt as if it were about to vanish and he were making it exist’

(134). By the close of the novel he has come to a greater understanding of how to look at it in the right way (which in Murdoch's philosophy is 'the radical task of the moral life').¹⁹

Seegard is a magical world of appearances which Edward must leave in order to come into a proper relationship with reality. His growing awareness of this necessity is shown in his reaction to the sight of sailing boats on the sea, viewed from Jesse's window:

'He thought, it's a sailing club, there's going to be a race, or rather the race must be over now. And suddenly he thought, there are people out there in a totally other world, people laughing and joking and kissing each other, men and pretty girls opening bottles of champagne. He turned back to the room, seeming now so small and quiet and lonely and sad.' (481).

Tellingly, when Edward asks the dying enchanter Jesse to come to look out of the same window at the sea, with the sun shining on it, and a sailing boat, Jesse knows that "I wouldn't see it - I'd see - something different" (194). The image of the sea acts as another kind of sign to Edward, recurring in his imagination long after he has left Seegard, and associated with his new awareness that 'there are all kinds of other people' (516). 'A picture of ordinary happiness came to him suddenly as a blue sea and a jostle of boats with huge coloured stripy sails' (517). Whilst Edward moves towards reality, learning to engage with the world and to look for what is good, the beautiful fantasy of Seegard crumbles: 'The enchanter's palace was already beginning to fall to pieces.' (484)

In *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, The Sea*, the use of the first-person narrative voice allows Murdoch to experiment with the convention of the unreliable narrator and the method of the older, wiser character narrating and commenting on the behaviour of his younger, blinded self. The author is able to lose herself behind her characters, using the freedom which the mask of the male narrator provides to radically question the relationship between life and art. Given Murdoch's skill and success with the first-person narrative voice, it seems incongruous that in *The Good Apprentice* she relinquishes it and seems to step into the role of

¹⁹ Nicholas Spice, 'Take That White Thing Away,' *London Review of Books* 17 Oct. 1985.

narrator herself. This approach received a mixed critical response. Bloom sees the narrative voice as intrusive; however, Gordon views it as one of the ways, along with her use of melodramatic devices and unlikely coincidences, that she eagerly tries to 'hasten along her story for the sake of an insight into a truth beyond stories that it is capable of revealing.'²⁰ Despite Gordon's more positive response, the quality of the later novels does seem to be slightly marred by the narrative voice's tendency to become prosaic and didactic. Lodge²¹ observes that when the intrusive authorial voice is used in modern fiction, this is usually with ironic intent, to expose the artificiality of the text. The realist illusion of *The Good Apprentice* is not undermined in this way. Murdoch continues to follow realist conventions, treating her characters as if they were real people and concealing the gap between life and art. The narrative voice allows her to enlarge on the ideas which are central to the text, but it also has the effect of distancing the reader from the characters, unlike the previous two novels discussed. The choices which Murdoch makes about narrative authority are inevitably affected by her inner conflict as she attempts to come to terms with her own stance as an artist. Furthermore, the pressure of the author can sometimes be felt behind characters, particularly those who are seeking the good. Although Murdoch admires Shakespeare for being the most invisible of writers,²² she has found it practically impossible to erase her own presence from her fiction. She tries to keep her own will distinct from the imagined will of her characters, believing it to be of paramount importance that they should be free, but on the other hand as narrator her frequent 'telling' about the characters risks becoming constrictive. However, her difficulty in keeping herself separate from her characters, who like herself are fiction-makers, can be seen as 'a major strength of her fiction, a source of authentic

²⁰ Gordon, 'Iris Murdoch's Comedies of Unselfing,' 117.

²¹ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992) 10.

²² Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' *Yale Review* 49, 1959: 261.

tension'.²³

In her later novels Murdoch appears to be exploring in great depth the possibilities offered by the model of the nineteenth-century novel. She explains in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' that the novelists whom she admires most, such as Eliot, Dickens and Tolstoy, are great because they are able to depict 'a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals.'²⁴ Murdoch seems to connect this achievement to the authors' choice of narrative method, as shown by her observations with regard to the limitations of using the first person narrative voice:

'the danger of this is that it's harder then to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they're being seen through his eyes. And I think my ideal novel - I mean the novel I would like to write and haven't yet written - would not be written in the first person, because I'd rather write a novel which is more scattered, with many different centres.'²⁵

This statement, made in 1978, seems to guide her choice of narrative voice in her later work. Harold Bloom judges Murdoch's narrative voice harshly in relation to Eliot's, claiming that it 'lacks George Eliot's authority, being too qualified and fussy when a rugged simplicity is required.'²⁶ Christopher Ricks has also criticised the narrative voice's tendency to use approximations such as 'sort of', 'kind of', believing that this evasiveness is due to an inability to write with the exactness required by the ideas being expressed.²⁷ One example of

²³ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, 78.

²⁴ Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' 257.

²⁵ Chevalier, J. L. (ed.) 'Rencontres avec Iris Murdoch.' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 96.

²⁶ Bloom, *Iris Murdoch*, 5.

²⁷ Christopher Ricks, 'The Daisychain of Passion,' *Sunday Times* 7 Sep. 1980: 43.

this can be found in the opening lines of the novel:

‘I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

These were not perhaps the exact words which Edward Baltram uttered to himself on the occasion of his momentous and mysterious summons, yet their echo was not absent even then, and later he repeated them often.’ (1)

The ‘perhaps’ of the second paragraph shows the implicit uncertainty of the narrator, who unexpectedly is not omniscient. Jack Turner describes this indeterminacy as a ‘revolutionary power’ moving under the ‘antiquated surface and traditional morality’ of the novel and undercutting her didacticism because Murdoch has by this stage developed the wisdom to understand and honour the limits of her power as an artist.²⁸ Murdoch and John Bayley²⁹ both believed that the individual human being is a mystery, and Murdoch acknowledges this through her use of approximations which show that no-one, not even the narrator or author, can know the truth about another person. Her fiction strives to say the unsayable, but ‘she refuses to be more than human’³⁰ Murdoch pictures nineteenth-century novelists as having ‘great confidence in a unified civilisation’ and ‘a kind of confidence in the solidity of spiritual values’ and believes that society lost this security and optimism during the twentieth century.³¹ Lodge suggests that one reason why the intrusive authorial voice became less popular at the turn of the century was because it ‘claims a kind of authority, a God-like

²⁸ Jack Turner, ‘Iris Murdoch and the Good Psychoanalyst,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 40.3, 1994: 305.

²⁹ John Bayley, *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (London: Constable, 1960).

³⁰ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 371.

³¹ Michael O. Bellamy, ‘An Interview with Iris Murdoch,’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 45.

omniscience, which our sceptical and relativistic age is reluctant to grant anyone.’³² This may be partly why Murdoch does not allow her narrative voice to be all-powerful and all-seeing. Murdoch is often implicitly criticised for ‘failing to bring us back to the nineteenth century itself’. However, rather than seeking an impossible return to the art of the past, or on the other hand attempting an equally impossible rejection of the past, she draws on its traditions for inspiration, in order to create ‘an art that is still nourished by the continuing *fact*, and the continuing mystery, of human difference.’³³

‘How can art do without personal sorcery, how can it not be secretly in league with egoism?’³⁴ Murdoch has struggled with this question throughout her career. She continuously insists on the need to relinquish power, yet inevitably, as an artist, she cannot avoid wielding some power over her creation. As Edward attempts to come to terms with the loss of Brownie and realises that ‘all movement, all journeying, had been an illusion’ (511) he begins to understand that there are two different ways to view everything that has happened:

‘In a way it’s all a muddle starting off with an accident: my breakdown, drugs, telepathy, my father’s illness, cloistered neurotic women, people arriving unexpectedly, all sorts of things which happened by pure chance. At so many points anything being otherwise could have made everything be otherwise. In another way it’s a whole complex thing, internally connected, like a dark globe, a dark world, as if we were all parts of a single drama, living inside a work of art. Perhaps important things in life are always like that, so that you can think of them both ways.’ (517-8)

This seems to be an example of Murdoch speaking through her character, because what is said here embodies Murdoch’s continuing struggle with magic. The artist is drawn in two directions, being influenced by the desire to create order and find meaning in life, and also by

³² Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 10.

³³ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 364.

³⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 66.

a contradictory sense that life is chaotic and formless. The more formless a novel is, or seems to be, the more it seems to imitate life. The novel cannot in fact lack form, being an imitation of randomness, and Murdoch states that ‘any artist both dreads and longs for the approach of necessity, the moment at which form irrevocably crystallises.’³⁵ In *The Good Apprentice* she seems to begin to come to terms with the complex relationship between art and power. Because absolute truth can only be found in silence, any fiction is inevitably an imperfect instrument for imagining truth. Speaking through her character Edward, she acknowledges that the artist cannot entirely renounce magic: ‘It’s dangerous, but I don’t see how we could get on without it’ (518). Whereas Jesse may be a representation of what Murdoch feared in herself, being a failed Prospero whose art exploits fantasy and gratifies the ego, Gordon optimistically suggests that in Edward, Murdoch has created a character who will use art for good magic.³⁶

Turner defines *The Good Apprentice* as ‘firmly formed, one of Murdoch’s ‘closed’ novels as she refers to them, a comedy in the Aristotelian sense (beginning in chaos and ending in resolution). The formula is reminiscent of the novels of Fanny Burney, Samuel Richardson, or - more appropriately - Charles Dickens.’³⁷ This would seem to suggest that Murdoch has abandoned the careful creation of the illusion of formlessness identified in *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, The Sea*, and has firmly aligned herself with the nineteenth-century fictional model, perhaps in conjunction with her developing awareness of the limitations of art’s power to imitate life. Gordon also interprets *The Good Apprentice* as a closed novel, which in his view has three resolutions.³⁸ Firstly, Edward comes to understand that there are two different ways of understanding his story, which means that ‘Murdoch can

³⁵ Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,’ 271.

³⁶ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch’s Fables of Unselfing*, 170.

³⁷ Turner, ‘Iris Murdoch and the Good Psychoanalyst,’ 303.

³⁸ Gordon, *Iris Murdoch’s Fables of Unselfing*, 170-171.

honour contingency without having to degrade an antithetical magic'. Secondly, the romance between Harry and Midge is ended as Midge, helped by Edward, relinquishes some of her illusions and returns to her husband Thomas. Finally, Harry, Stuart and Edward celebrate three types of goodness: hedonism, virtue and art. In fact the ending of the novel seems to be more open than Gordon and Turner suggest. Murdoch has said that out of the three characters who toast the good, only Stuart can be seen as a 'good apprentice', whereas '[t]he other two are nowhere near having the concept at all.'³⁹ Thus their lives extend beyond the artificial framework of the novel, for they are still subjects in the making, with various possibilities open to them. To Johnson, *The Good Apprentice* is notable for its refusal to sum anything up: 'it leaves the door open for all the different ways in which the characters within the novel and the audience outside the novel choose to read their human experience'⁴⁰ Murdoch does not finally permit didacticism to take over; she does not offer clear answers to the metaphysical questions which she asks, but shows the reader that what is of most importance is to ask these questions and to keep struggling towards a clearer understanding of their implications. Possibly the closest Murdoch gets to 'summing up' is in the way that she emphasises the necessity of seeking signs of goodness in the world. However, it is for the individual to learn to perceive these signs, which will be constantly redefined and reinterpreted on the ongoing pilgrimage from appearance to reality.

³⁹ Barbara Stevens Heusel, 'A Dialogue with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 200.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, 106.

Chapter Five: CONCLUSION

‘Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether representational or not it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see.’¹

Murdoch states in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, ‘in good art we do not ask for realism, we ask for truth.’² Her own search for truth is endless. As I have shown, there is a creative tension in her work which stems from the conflict between the realist tradition and her philosophy which has led her beyond it. Murdoch shows us that there is no single, authoritative, shared reality which can be accurately presented using language: ‘[w]hat does exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed, it escapes from language and science, it is more and other than our descriptions of it.’³ Her struggle to get under the net of language in order to dissolve the distance between the signifier and the signified has led her to engage with issues and experiment with techniques which are dominant although not unique to the postmodern aesthetic.

Murdoch’s innovation can be perceived in all three of the novels which I have analysed. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, she foregrounds the fictionality of the text through techniques such as frame-breaking, and this emphasis on the text’s artifice seems to indicate her awareness that the artist cannot hope to reproduce reality in words and that some transformation is therefore necessary. By destroying the illusion of the reality of the text, Murdoch is able to present life and art in the right relationship to each other and paradoxically to achieve greater truth to reality.

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 88.

² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992) 19.

³ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1953) 14.

Murdoch's careful creation of open-endedness in all three novels gives the impression that art is unable to control life. All of these novels seem to extend beyond the final page, opening up new possibilities for the characters. As discussed in Chapter Two, the postscripts of *The Black Prince* seem to deconstruct Bradley's account, but a careful reading shows us that they in fact endorse it. Bradley meditates on the meaninglessness of beginnings and endings, yet his narrative still has a hidden structural balance because the beginning and ending subtly complement each other. In Chapter Three I have considered how *The Sea, The Sea* echoes *The Tempest* in its apparent refusal of closure, despite the underlying circularity of Charles's drift back to the power games of the theatre. Finally, as I have shown in Chapter Four, the characters of *The Good Apprentice* seem to have the sense of life continuing beyond the end of the novel into an unknown future, as favoured by Henry James. The narrative voice seems to refrain from any kind of summing up, although some commentators have noted the careful layering of value inherent in Murdoch's presentation of different types of goodness. This artful concealment of form indicates Murdoch's ambivalence regarding the power of the artist. She is unable to renounce form entirely, but she tries her utmost to prevent it from crystallising, due to her awareness that the more formless the novel appears to be, the more it can create the illusion of seeming to represent reality.

I have considered how Murdoch tirelessly interrogates the relationship between author and character. In the case of the first two novels in particular, she appears to identify to some extent with her protagonists, and can at times be sensed speaking through them, which implies her sympathy for their desire of power and control. Both Bradley and Charles aspire to align themselves with Shakespeare, the supreme artist. Bradley wants to create his own Hamlet, has subconsciously cast Julian in this role, attempts to express himself through her and finally tears this identity apart through the act of rape. Charles is another character who finds it impossible to renounce the power of the artist, self-consciously identifying himself with Prospero, and through him, Shakespeare. His hubris is such that he attempts to create a work of art in which he is both the leading character and creator. His wish to impose form on his life and thereby turn it into art indicates his inability to deal with the contingency of reality. Finally, in *The Good*

Apprentice, we are presented with the artist Jesse who has lost his power. No longer able to create illusions, he has become the site of fantasies which are projected onto him by others. Murdoch has commented on the dangers of art: '[i]t is difficult for any artist not to falsify. [. . .] the temptation to the ego is enormous since it really does seem here to dispose of the godlike power it secretly dreams of.'⁴ Her characters persist in being artists because art offers the temptation to impose form and wield ego-gratifying power. In all three novels Murdoch seems to be utilising her characters to scrutinise these shortcomings which she fears in herself as an artist. She puts them through ordeals in which their selfhood is flayed, as she in turn seeks her own unselfing. This is perhaps most apparent in *The Black Prince*, in which Murdoch's use of Bradley reflects his own use of Julian. She articulates some of her views through him, puts him through punishing ordeals and eventually reduces him to silence. Thus it seems that Murdoch also desires to emulate Shakespeare, although she struggles to equal that 'most invisible of writers'⁵ in his ability to erase his presence from the text. We have seen how, paradoxically, Murdoch's struggle with the artist's power is a source of great strength in her work. There are signs that she gradually comes to terms with the artist's limitations: Bradley has to realise that Julian is not an extension of himself, Charles tries to control and rationalise his world but learns that the sea monster, the heart of darkness in the novel, is inexplicable, and in *The Good Apprentice* the narrator is not permitted to be all-knowing, due to the endless mystery of human beings.

As I have discussed, Murdoch's experimentation can be viewed as postmodern but is far more complex than a simple opposition to realism. Her positive view of the realist tradition has been well-documented:

'I see no reason to leave the English novel tradition unless you have a good reason for doing so. It's a marvellously versatile form; within what looks like - and I suppose is - a conventional novel you can do anything under the sun. You can investigate anything, you can use any mode of thought you like, you can use

⁴ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 86.

⁵ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' *Yale Review* 49, 1959: 261.

language almost any way you like.’⁶

By making the problems of the journey from appearance to reality the subject of her novels, she has revitalised the tradition and extended the realist novel’s possibilities. Because Murdoch is aiming so high, her achievements will inevitably be imperfect and she is aware of this: ‘one’s ability to improve is still extraordinarily limited. One’s always hoping to do better next time: to create better characters, to break out of certain patterns.’⁷ Nevertheless, by showing us the artifice of realism, she creates a personal, visionary realism which has its own truth.

Murdoch shows us the importance of paying close attention to signs which offer freedom from endless repetition and provide light towards which we reach out from the cave of illusion. She also shows us how easily these signs can be misinterpreted. In *The Black Prince*, Shakespeare’s language tears Bradley out of himself and overwhelms him with love which is displaced onto Julian. In *The Sea, The Sea*, the sight of the seals at the end of the ‘History’ section lifts Charles out of his misery, but in his continuing egoism he assumes that they are present in order to bless him. These glimpses of reality are perhaps too much for human nature to deal with and ultimately we have to settle for a partial illumination of the truth. Murdoch’s own work has now become a sign of reality for her readers. Anne Rowe has commented on the ‘sublime effect’ which her novels produce.⁸ Like the other works of good art which Murdoch draws our attention to, her novels makes us work to produce meaning from them, and have the effect of making us realise what is good and real outside the self, thereby assisting our own ongoing process of unselfing.

⁶ Stephen Glover, ‘Iris Murdoch Talks To Stephen Glover,’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 34.

⁷ Jack I. Biles, ‘An Interview with Iris Murdoch,’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 65.

⁸ Anne Rowe, *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) 192.

Because the stripping away of the illusion-generating ego is a continuous process, the concept of reality never stabilises. Murdoch observes that '[i]n the fight of art against nature, nature is bound to win and art had better realise this. That is, the artist must always be readjusting what he says, the good artist is learning the whole time by looking at the world.'⁹ Therefore, although truth cannot be secured, our task is still to strive to move towards it. For Murdoch, this is the only true quest for humanity. Murdoch's writing remains vitally relevant to the modern world. In an era when people spend much of their time engaging with symbolic representations and simulated experiences, there is the danger that they may become increasingly alienated from reality. Mediation and simulation problematise the question of what is actually 'real'. Murdoch reminds us of the paramount importance of learning to pay attention and look at the world with a just and loving vision in order to try to see what is true and real. This is a task which does not end, and Murdoch is unafraid to ask fundamental questions about the way to perceive this reality.

⁹ J. L. Chevalier, 'Rencontres avec Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 87.

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